

MEETING THE NEEDS OF DISTANCE LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

This study draws on the experience of a cohort of 22 multinational and multilingual students enrolled in a Master in Education (MEd) distance learning program administered by a British university. Its purpose is to locate the aims and philosophies of distance learning within the experiences of actual distance learners in order to see if learners' needs were being met by the program and to obtain a fuller understanding of core aspects of distance education. The study found that students were, on the whole, satisfied with the course materials, the choice of modules, assignment feedback, and length of time given to complete the assignments, but significant problems surfaced regarding issues of student support, and access to and provision of resource materials. Arguably, these are issues intrinsic to the successful provision of distance learning courses, and the results both concord with aspects of the research literature (Burge & Howard, 1990; Chen, 1997; Hyland, 2001; Morgan, 1995; Robinson, 1995; Simpson, 2000; Tait, 2000) and raise some interesting questions regarding the provision of distance education and its ability to meet the needs of learners.

INTRODUCTION

Most research into the area of distance learning has been carried out with native-English speakers or monolingual speakers, and very few studies have examined the concerns of multilingual and multinational distance learners. Accordingly, this paper seeks to address the lack of research into this learner group by documenting the results of a research project undertaken with multilingual and multinational students (including myself) enrolled on a British university's Master in Education (MEd) distance learning programme administered in Hong Kong. The student cohort comprised Hong Kong Chinese students, Macanese students, native-Japanese speakers, native-German speakers, and native-English speakers from the United Kingdom and Australia.

The study was intended to assess the experiences of actual distance learners and to see if students' needs were being met by the programme. The results of the study will be presented and discussed in relation to the aims and philosophies that underpin distance education, the strengths and weaknesses of distance education, and the needs of distance learners as they relate to the key issues of course materials and learning support.

RESEARCH REVIEW

What is distance education?

Before a fuller discussion of distance education can be undertaken, it is necessary first to clarify the terms *open learning* and *distance learning*. In the field of non-traditional, post-school education, open learning and distance learning are terms which are often used interchangeably, and the literature abounds with overlapping terminology and conflicting viewpoints. Some propose that there is no distinction between the two (Rumble, 1989), and that "distance learning is a sub-category of open learning" (Lewis & Spencer, 1986, p. 17); others that "Open learning is not synonymous with distance education" (Foks, 1987, p. 74), a view echoed by Garrison (1990), who states that, "Open learning systems are not equivalent to ... distance education" (p. 119).

It appears that there are significant differences between the two terms, although much modern usage blurs the distinction. *Distance learning* refers mainly to a mode of delivery (independent learning at a distance through the means of self-study texts and non-contiguous communication), while *open learning* includes the notions of both openness and flexibility (whereby students have personal autonomy over their studies and where access restrictions and privileges have been removed) and distance (as in independence from the teacher).

Keegan (1990, p. 44) identifies five main elements of distance education: the separation of teacher and learner; the influence of an educational organization; the use of technical media (usually print) to unite the teacher and learner and to carry educational content; the provision of two-way communication so that the student may benefit from or even initiate dialogue; and the possibility of occasional meetings for both didactic and socialization purposes. Keegan's formulation is a useful one (and one which appears to have been generally accepted by researchers, although one criticised by Garrison, 1990, as being too narrow), and is considered a suitable one for this paper since the distance learning programme under study included these five elements.

The Strengths and Weaknesses of Distance Education

Distance learning, like any kind of learning, can serve different ends, but distance learning appears mainly to serve those who cannot or do not want to make use of classroom teaching. Demanding professional commitments and family responsibilities of many adults often make attending a conventional, full-time, face-to-face course with fixed timetables a rather unrealistic proposition, and the reasons why adults choose distance education are primarily "the convenience, flexibility and adaptability of this mode of education to suit individual students' needs" (Holmberg, 1989, p. 24).

All learning requires a degree of motivation, self-discipline, and independence on behalf of the learner, but these aspects are arguably more pertinent in the case of distance learning, where the student is largely self-directed and unsupervised, and expected to be more autonomous. Threlkeld and Brzoska (1994) state that "maturity, high motivation levels, and self-discipline have been shown to be necessary characteristics of successful, satisfied students" (p. 53). One of the main foci of this study is what factors contribute to this notion of "successful, satisfied students."

Distance study is self-study, but the student is not alone. As Holmberg (1989) describes it, "A kind of conversation in the form of two-way traffic occurs through the written or otherwise mediated interaction between the students and the tutors and others belonging to the supporting institution" (p. 27). Holmberg goes on to state that, "conversation is brought about by the presentation of the study matter if this is characterised by a personal approach...and causes the students to discuss the contents with themselves" (p. 27). Such a development can be brought about by a readable style of presentation. The issue of course materials is directly relevant to the current study, and the dialogic approach to materials will be examined in more detail later in the paper.

Kirkup and Jones (1996) believe that the success of distance learning courses "cannot be assumed" (p. 277). Sharp cut-off dates for tutor-marked assignments, rigidity of learning content and materials, and inflexible learning structures are all common in distance education systems (Keegan, 1990), and are factors which clearly will not meet the needs of all learners. Kirkup and Jones (1996) summarise the most significant weaknesses of distance education as (a) its inability to offer dialogue in the way that conventional face-to-face education does; (b) the inflexibility of its content and study method; and (c) the isolation and individualisation of the student.

Meeting the Needs of Distance Learners: Student Satisfaction

Garrison (1990) states that, "the majority of distance education is concerned with meeting the educational needs of adults" (p. 103), and Holmberg (1986) that "distance teaching will support student motivation,

promote learning pleasure and effectiveness if offered in a way to make the study relevant to the individual learner and his/her needs" (p. 123).

Defining and categorising adult learners' needs is, though, a difficult task. Distance education offers students an opportunity to "study and learn in a peer-free environment, when and if they prefer it" (Verduin & Clark, 1991, p. 27), while also providing support during the learning experience in terms of guidance, planning, and feedback that is necessary for continued student motivation and completion of the course.

A review of the literature demonstrates that while there is no significant difference in achievement levels between distant and traditional learners, there is "considerable variance in student attitudes and satisfaction levels" (Johnstone, 1991, cited in Threlkeld & Brzoska, 1994, p. 49). Student satisfaction in distance education has been examined by a number of researchers (Beare, 1989; Hilgenberg & Tolone, 2000; Jones, 1992; McCleary & Egan, 1989). One of the most common problems of many distance learning courses is the limitation of dialogue between teachers and learners, and amongst learners themselves. As Kirkup and Jones (1996) state, "Students need dialogue with their teachers and with other students in order to consolidate and check on their own learning" (p. 278). Chen (1997) supports this view, finding student-instructor dialogue an important factor in distance learning. Furthermore, dialogue allows students to assess their learning and develop a sense of community with other students (a measure that can counter the effects of isolation often experienced by distance learners), and also allows the institution to assess its teaching objectives and see if they are being fulfilled.

Threlkeld and Brzoska (1994) maintain that there is little empirical evidence to show mediated instruction suffers in comparison to face-to-face instruction, stating that "the instructional medium doesn't appear to make any important difference in student achievement, attitudes and retention" (p. 42). They conclude that the media itself is not as important to instruction as other variables, such as learner characteristics, motivation, and instructional alternatives. It is these variables, they suggest, that are more pertinent to the process of learning and teaching at a distance, and thus to the ability of distance education to meet the needs of learners.

The need for face-to-face meetings is undoubtedly important to the distance learner, although it is perhaps more a matter of the degree of interactivity than whether or not any interactivity takes place. As Stone (1990, cited in Threlkeld & Brzoska, 1994, p. 47) argues in his assessment of interactivity in distance learning, adult learners may actually perform better in situations where they control not only where but when learning occurs, and concludes that as long as students have some form of interaction with tutors, then high quality learning can still occur.

One way to counterbalance the absence of dialogue in distance learning is to institute sufficient student support services. Tait (1995) categorises student support as advice/counselling, tutoring (individually or in groups), the learning of study skills, peer group support, feedback concerning assessment and progress, language support and administrative problem-solving, where the aim is to support students' individual learning whether alone or in groups. Student support is a key issue in the provision of distance education, and three services appear repeatedly in the literature: timely student feedback, on-site support, and access to library materials. The response of tutors and "turn-around time" for comments and grading is cited again and again as being a critical component of student support, with students who receive timely feedback on assignments responding more positively to the course than those who have to wait for feedback (Delbecq & Scates, 1989). The support provided by on-site facilitators has also been consistently cited as crucial to the effectiveness of a distance education programme (McCleary & Egan, 1989; Murphy & Yum, 1998; Threlkeld, 1992; Threlkeld & Brzoska, 1994). Burge and Howard (1990), too, in their questionnaire study of audio-conferencing in Canadian graduate education, found that the effective utilisation of local tutors (or on-site facilitators) increases student satisfaction with courses.

Finally, access to library materials is a key component of distance education. For many learners, access to library resources may well be limited. This creates obvious problems for the distance learner. An evaluation of learner support conducted by Dillon, Gunawardena, and Parker (1992; cited in Threlkeld & Brzoska, 1994, p. 57) noted that "Library resources are very important to distance students as the majority of them...indicated that success in the course required access to library materials." The issue of student support has received renewed interest recently, with Tait (2000) and Simpson (2000) both exploring this aspect of distance learning in some detail.

In considering student support services, any institution that offers courses through distance learning must address the question of who their learners are and what their needs are. The institution must then determine how those needs can be met with regard to constraints of costs, technologies, and geography. It appears that media such as correspondence, face-to-face, telephone, and electronic communications provide a variety of means which differ widely in their effectiveness (for individuals and groups) and in ways that appear to be only partially understood (Tait, 1995), while Lewis (1995) states that the tutor is "the main source of support for the student beyond the course materials" (p. 245). Clearly, then, the course materials and the tutors are of significant import in distance education, and resources that contribute greatly to meeting the needs of learners.

In reference to the programme conducted by a British university, it is possible to identify five areas of support provision: local tutors who provided assignment feedback and arranged study groups and individual meetings; week-long intensive study schools (ISS's) which took place biannually in Hong Kong; the facility to communicate with the course tutors in the UK via e-mail; feedback from the tutors in the UK; and access to a library of relevant texts located at the British Council (BC), the institution which mediated between the British university and the Hong Kong-based students. This would appear to be a comprehensive support structure, but any structure needs to be implemented and monitored efficiently if it is to achieve its aims.

METHOD

Introduction

The research study was undertaken in an attempt to identify some of the key issues in distance education with specific reference to a group of distance learners enrolled on a two-year, part-time MEd (ELT) distance learning programme delivered by an established British university, and to see how far their individual needs were being met by the course.

Background to the Course

The Master of Education (ELT) by Distance Learning offered by the university was designed as an opportunity for teachers to study at home for a post-graduate qualification. The four main features of the course were that it could be completed in two years; it followed a modular structure which allowed course members to progress at their own pace; assignments were related to the work of course members; and access to the research expertise of the members of university staff was provided.

Detailed course materials were provided for each module, and each student was allocated a tutor in the UK with whom regular contact (by post, telephone, fax, or e-mail) could be maintained. In addition, students were required to attend four intensive study schools (ISS's) in Hong Kong over two academic years for consultation with the course director and specialist tutors.

A range of six modules was offered which could be combined in various ways to provide specialisation in Educational Management, English Language Teaching, Social Psychology of Special Education, Child Development, Information Technology in Education, and Science Education. The course required students to complete four taught modules and was continuously assessed. An assignment of 6,000 words

was required for each of the four modules, followed by a dissertation of 20,000 words. Set books were provided for each module, along with Module Files (which presented major issues and areas of investigation on the module topic), Supplementary Notes (including relevant and up-to-date journal papers), and a Guide for Course Materials (which included an academic plan and timetable together with details of assignments).

Course members maintained contact with the university through the Course Director, with the British Council in Hong Kong acting in an administrative role (distributing course materials, collecting and sending assignments/dissertations to the UK, providing rooms for the ISS lectures and seminars, etc.). For each module, the university appointed specialist Associate Local Tutors (who were based in Hong Kong) to give support and guidance in the study of the modules and the preparation of the assignments. Contact with university staff was facilitated through attendance at the ISS's held in Hong Kong (at the British Council) every June and December. At the ISS's, students could meet university tutors and other students and develop their own networks and contacts. For the dissertation, students were allocated a personal supervisor from the university's Department of Educational Studies.

The Questionnaire

The self-completion questionnaire (see [Appendix](#) for a copy of the one used in this survey) was selected as the most appropriate tool for two reasons: (a) because it is an effective small-scale research tool, and (b) because "the knowledge needed is controlled by the questions, therefore it affords a good deal of precision and clarity" (McDonough & McDonough, 1997, p. 171).

As Cohen and Manion (1998) state, "surveys gather data at a particular point in time with the intention of describing the nature of existing conditions ... or determining the relationships which exist between specific events" (p. 83). In addition, given the size of the study and number of people involved, a questionnaire was particularly appropriate for collecting data in a relatively quick and inexpensive manner (Bell, 1999, p. 126). Furthermore, because they are anonymous, questionnaires encourage respondents to be honest, and Seliger and Shohamy (2000) believe that they provide data which are more "uniform" and "accurate" than that obtained by other methods (p. 172)).

In an effort to maximise the response rate, the questionnaire was designed to be deliberately short (eight questions) and to have the majority of questions (questions 1-6) be of the scaled type (utilising a four-point Likert-like scale). Only two of the questions were open-ended questions (questions 7 and 8), because, while I didn't want respondents to feel pressured into writing too much, more individual points of view and more detailed information than could be elicited in the closed questions were required.

The use of the fixed-alternative format gave the respondents specific and limited alternative responses from which to select the one closest to their own viewpoint. These kind of questions are easier for respondents to answer than open-ended types, and the standardisation of alternative responses allows for comparability of answers, which in turn facilitates the coding, tabulating and interpreting of data.

It has been argued that there is a tendency for respondents to show "indecisiveness" when answering questionnaires (Rust & Golombok, 1992, p. 154), and avoid either agreement or disagreement with scaled questions by opting for the middle (neutral/no opinion) category. To combat such a propensity, it was decided not to include a middle category as a means of ensuring relevant levels of agreement and disagreement. This follows Walonick's (1997) finding that questions which exclude the middle option produce a greater volume of accurate data. To this end, the questions were designed -- as far as possible -- to minimise any potential irritation that respondents might feel (through the omission of a middle category) with items they deemed unanswerable.

A review of the literature indicated that student satisfaction with a distance learning course revolves around issues of course materials and student support (in terms of feedback, on-site support and access to library materials). The survey questions thus focused mainly on these two areas.

A pilot study involving six people showed that the questionnaire contained no confusing or ambiguous questions, and there was thus no need to alter or amend the questions or the format of the questionnaire. The pilot group were drawn from the tutors and students on a distance learning course offered by a local (i.e., Hong Kong) university, and were selected because of their familiarity with issues related to distance learning programmes.

Fieldwork

The sample of students was drawn from the whole cohort of students enrolled on the British university's MEd (ELT) distance learning programme, and included both native and non-native speakers of English. Access to the cohort was granted by the British Council in Hong Kong, which was the organisation responsible for liaising between the British university and the Hong Kong-based students. (I was enrolled on the programme and, at the time of the study, had completed one year of the two-year course.) Because of issues related to personal privacy, the British Council forwarded the questionnaire (see [Appendix](#)) and covering letter to the student cohort on my behalf.

In order to counter any potential reservations and to provide a guarantee of confidentiality, respondents were given the opportunity of returning the questionnaire either by fax to me directly or via an e-mail forwarded by the British Council (with the respondent's e-mail address and other identifying features removed). Otherwise, respondents could return the questionnaire to me directly by e-mail.

Processing the Data

In processing the questionnaire data, and following Cohen and Manion (1994, p. 101), the returned self-completion questionnaires were checked for completeness, accuracy, and uniformity. It was discovered that each respondent had answered every question and, furthermore, that all questions were answered accurately (in the sense that appropriate answers had been given to the questions). Respondents also interpreted the instructions and questions uniformly.

Response Rate

The response rate was calculated by comparing the number of questionnaires analysed with the number distributed to students.

Table 1. Summary of Questionnaire Response Rate

Number of questionnaires distributed	54
Number of questionnaires returned	22
Response rate	41%

In order to maximise the response level, a reminder e-mail was sent to those students who did not respond the first time, and included the same questionnaire and a follow-up covering letter emphasising the importance of the survey and the value of the respondents' participation. The questionnaire and covering letter was again forwarded to students by the British Council on my behalf. The reminder had the effect of increasing the response rate by just three (to 14). Because of this rather disappointing response rate, a third and final attempt to gather data from the cohort led to a further 12 students being sent the questionnaire by e-mail (as an attachment forwarded to them on my behalf by a colleague still enrolled on the programme), which resulted in eight more students responding. (The third reminder also included a number of moderator variables which were absent from the first two survey attempts. The additional demographic information obtained from the last eight respondents focused on the student's gender, nationality, first language, and stage of the course, and this group comprised five native-speakers and three non-native speakers. Findings from these variables are discussed at relevant points in the [results and discussion](#) section.)

It remains, however, that the overall response rate of 41% was a little disappointing. There are, perhaps, a number of reasons for the low response rate. The questionnaire was sent out in mid-July, which coincided with the academic summer holiday. Since many of the students on the course were either practising teachers or engaged in full-time work at educational institutions, it is likely that some would have been on holiday or outside Hong Kong at the time. Furthermore, the subjects may have been influenced by the fact that I was also enrolled on the programme, and may thus have been hesitant to give out personal information to a fellow classmate. Finally, since the questionnaire asked students to rate their satisfaction with the university's distance learning programme, some may have been reluctant, for whatever reason, to explicitly voice their opinions and/or criticisms (despite their anonymity being assured). A counter view to this, however, is that since the questionnaire focussed on issues directly related to students' learning (an endeavour that they are investing time, effort, and money in), it might not have been unreasonable to expect that more people would have been willing to respond.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2 shows a breakdown of student responses regarding questions 1-6 (the scaled questions). Since questions 7 and 8 were open-ended questions, the results cannot be similarly quantified, though common themes were identified through a qualitative analysis.

Table 2. Student Responses to Questions 1-6 of the Survey Questionnaire

	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
Q1	2	18	1	1
Q2	7	13	1	1
Q3	1	12	6	1
Q4	4	14	3	1
Q5	0	8	11	3
Q6	0	4	17	1

Course Materials

Q1. How satisfied are you with the course materials provided on the programme?

Most respondents (91%) were either satisfied or very satisfied with the course materials, while just 9% were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. In a follow-up comment with regard to the course materials, one respondent stated that "material mentioned in the modules is often difficult to obtain and not supplied as reading material." Others stated that "I think more textbooks should have been given to us" and "resource books in the British Council were not enough." It is worth noting that, in the absence of a tutor, the role of learning materials is of great importance. Holmberg (1986) states that the provision of extra materials in the form of a specially prepared reader is advisable "when students have inadequate library facilities or when only a few selected texts are relevant" (p. 47). This is a point that relates to the frustration felt by some respondents who do not have access to an adequate library, one of whom reported that "looking for resources for supporting my ideas was very difficult as I had a problem accessing the local university libraries," and a third that "we should have been given access to at least one university library in Hong Kong for the duration of the course; I also think that the [British university's] on-line library should have been easier to access -- I struggled for months to get some kind of access, and I eventually only had limited access during my dissertation stage."

Other comments relating to the course materials included "the materials are written in an accessible and personal style" and a few respondents welcomed the "time-outs" that have been built into the materials allow for a degree of dialogic exchange, interaction, and engagement with the text. By attempting to

involve the learner emotionally, the materials encouraged a degree of self-reflection on the part of the learner and thus satisfied Morgan's (1995) concern that distance learning texts "encourage reflection in learning" (p. 59).

An analysis of the final eight respondents' questionnaires revealed no significant differences between native-speakers (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS) answers in this regard.

Choice of Modules

Q2. How satisfied are you with the choice of modules available on the programme?

Respondents were fairly unanimous in this respect, with most (91%) being either satisfied or very satisfied with the choice, and only 9% dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. Comments on the choice of modules ranged from "the topics are directly relevant to me" to "the modules I've encountered so far have been thought-provoking and appealing."

Assignment Feedback

Q3. How satisfied are you with the feedback you have received for your assignments?

This question was not applicable to two respondents since they had yet to receive feedback for their first assignment. Of the remaining respondents, almost two thirds (65%) were satisfied or very satisfied, with 35% being either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. Comments relating to the latter included, "I was unimpressed with the feedback, which I felt was misleading from a local tutor about a problematic assignment, followed by some very negative and unhelpful comments on the same assignment from the marker in the UK." Hyland (2001, p. 233) states that in the distance learning context, "feedback plays a crucial role in opening and maintaining a dialogue between tutors and students ... [and] also serves an important function in motivating and encouraging students." Holmberg (1983) avers that empirical studies have shown that "quick handling with proper tutor comments on students' papers has proved essential for students' success" (p. 322), and others (Egan, Sebastian, & Welch, 1991; Threlkeld & Brzoska, 1994) that timely feedback regarding assignments is a critical component of learner support.

Again, no significant differences between native-speakers (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS) answers were discovered in this regard.

Assignment Completion Time

Q4. How satisfied are you with the length of time you are given to complete your assignments?

The majority of respondents (82%) were either satisfied or very satisfied with assignment completion times, while 18% were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. Two respondents stated that they would like more flexibility in this respect, although since the programme was not an open learning course, it seems reasonable to have cut-off dates for assignments. Deadlines can also be a motivating factor, and one student stated that "sufficient flexibility has been built into the course by the provision of assignment extensions and the option to defer if necessary."

As before, a bias analysis of the answers given by the NS and NNS on this point showed no major differences between the two groups.

Student Support

Q5. How satisfied are you with the range of support provided on the programme (i.e., in terms of local tutors, ISS's and the British Council)?

This was the aspect of distance learning that I most wished to focus on, so questions 5, 6, and 7 related to the provision and management of student support services.

In relation to question 5, nearly two thirds of respondents (64%) were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the range of support provided on the programme in terms of the local tutors, the ISS's and the British Council, while 36% were satisfied or very satisfied. From the follow-up comments in questions 7 and 8, it was possible to identify a number of specific concerns, namely, that while students welcomed the provision of local tutors, many found the quality of the support they provided to be lacking. Comments included "the quality of their input and advice varies, some are helpful while others are rather passionless and directionless," "I am rather dissatisfied with the aspect [sic] of the local tutors provided," "local tutors could be more helpful," and "the local tutors provide little support; this term we haven't even been informed yet about our tutors -- if there are any this term!" One respondent reported a bad experience with the first local tutor and decided not to seek tutor assistance for subsequent modules.

In general, the usefulness of the local tutors was found to be highly variable, with one tutor in particular being identified by several respondents as being extremely unfocussed and largely unhelpful. One student comment in this regard was that "My first tutor provided meaningless feedback and several of my fellow students felt the same way," while another stated that "I was very unhappy with my first tutor. She tried to dissuade me from pursuing the assignment topic of my choice, stating that she wasn't familiar with the subject area, and suggesting I choose an assignment on an entirely different topic simply because it was one she was more comfortable with."

In terms of the intensive study schools, most seem happy with them ("the ISS's have so far been useful," "the intensive seminars have been [of] a very high quality," and "I felt that most of the ISS input was fine, and during face-to-face meetings I received a lot of in-depth information"), but three respondents would like them to be longer than they were and to include more lectures/seminars. This might then prevent, in the words of one respondent, the feeling that "I could have got more out of the ISS if there had been more time ... the lecturers seemed to be too pressured and tired to give what I, personally, would have liked." Chen (1997) discovered that a significant factor in student satisfaction with distance learning is student-instructor dialogue. And Holmberg (1986), with regard to face-to-face sessions in distance education, found that "they are useful as opportunities to consult subject specialists ... and to exchange views with tutors and fellow-students," and thus help to stimulate and motivate students' learning (p. 53).

A few respondents mentioned the support provided by the British Council, variously stating that "the BC staff have always been prepared to do that little extra to help out," "the BC staff are well-organised and helpful," and "the people at the British Council were very supportive and always responded to my questions or request immediately." On the other hand, another respondent stated that "contact between [the university in the UK] and the BC is minimal," and another that "local tutors are often contacted late after the ISS ... which cuts down on the time available to discuss assignments," while another complained about "the speed of communication between the students and the school (sic)." These last three comments would, however, appear to reflect more on the course organisers at the British university rather than on the staff at the BC (although there may well be mitigating circumstances for any breakdown in communication between the university and the BC -- the sudden illness of a key member of the university staff, for example).

Q6. How satisfied are you with the level of support provided on the programme (ie is it enough)?

In relation to question 6, respondents were almost unanimous in stating their dissatisfaction with the level of support provided on the programme, with 82% being dissatisfied or very dissatisfied, and just 18% satisfied. The level of support provided was deemed to be insufficient, and follow-up comments on this issue (given in response to Q7) ranged from "more support will (sic) be much better" and "There is only little support," to "I can't say we are well 'looked after' and cared for" and "No-one checks to see if you're getting on OK." If the on-site support provided by the university programme is characterised as consisting of the local tutors and the staff at the British Council's Distance Learning Centre, then these are revealing comments since, in their overview of research into distance education, Threlkeld and Brzoska (1994) state

that the support provided by the on-site facilitators is "critical to the effectiveness of a distance education programme" (p. 55).

Q7. What aspects of the support provided on the programme do you like or dislike?

In relation to question 7, the ability to contact the university tutors directly and the willingness of university tutors to communicate by e-mail was given by eight respondents as an aspect of the course they liked (although one respondent disliked "the way support dwindles because of low intake numbers"). The way the course is organised was liked by five respondents, as was "the broad base it gives students to choose their own path through each module." In addition, the fact that students were given the opportunity to negotiate alternative assignment titles if they felt the ones available did not accommodate them was an aspect that was welcomed by one respondent. This (along with the opportunity to extend assignment/dissertation deadlines and/or defer for a certain period if necessary) provided a level of flexibility that a number of respondents appreciated.

Interestingly, when the responses of the NS and NNS of the last eight respondents were analysed in regard to questions 5 and 6, it was the NNS who expressed higher levels of satisfaction than the NS with both the range and level of support provided by the programme. All three of the NNS reported themselves satisfied with the range of support, and two of the three satisfied with the level of support. This contrasts greatly with the NS, all five of whom reported themselves dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with both the range and level of support. Non-native English proficiency would appear to be a factor that positively influences satisfaction levels, although more research in this area is needed before such a claim could be considered conclusive.

Suggestions for Improving the Course

Q8. What areas, if any, of the programme could be improved?

An analysis of responses to this question highlighted a number of common concerns, with 12 respondents criticising the limited number and type of books provided by the British university and located in the BC library (one respondent finding it "incomprehensible that all the classical literature and [key educational works by noted authors] are not available"). This factor was clearly a concern for those students who did not have access to a university library or similar resource for reference books, articles and journals.

As discussed before, comments relating to the issue of student support were also given in response to this question. In tandem with the range of support provided on the programme, the issue of the level of student support seems to be one that is failing to meet the needs of many students. As stated earlier, this is an area that would appear to be worth looking into in more detail.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It seems that students were, on the whole, satisfied with the course materials, the choice of modules, assignment feedback, and length of time given to complete assignments. In these areas, it seems fair to say that most students' needs were being largely met.

An area of significant concern, however, was that of student support. Although this is an issue that inherently involves a high degree of subjectivity, this would appear to be an area worthy of further investigation since it relates directly to students' needs, and it would appear that students' needs are not being met in this aspect. Furthermore, as Robinson (1995) states in her review of research literature regarding learner support, "multiple interacting factors (personal, environmental and course variables) are at work in determining learner success," although some "institutional interventions can assist if appropriately targeted" (p. 222).

Many people clearly appreciated the provision of local tutors, but there were questions about the quality of the assistance they provided in practice. As a way of more effectively utilising this valuable resource, it would be worthwhile for the course organisers and administrators to implement closer screening and monitoring of local tutors.

The issue of access to library materials is often cited by researchers as a key component in distance education (Cavanagh, 1994; Dillon et al, 1992; Tait, 2000). This is germane to the current programme, and since a number of students do not have access to reference material (and have expressed frustration at not being able to access the material they need to complete their work), it would appear to be worth looking into ways of providing students with the ability to access key resource material, either by establishing a relationship for this purpose with a local university or by providing access to an on-line data bank. Appleton (1994) goes so far as to state that "academic institutions ... have a responsibility to provide off-campus students with resources and facilities equivalent to their on-campus peers" (p. 79).

Since the Internet has rapidly become a source of daily communications, education via the Internet is now more widely used. Many educational institutions actively use the Internet to deliver completely on-line programmes. In America, for example, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 1999, cited in Lim, 2001) reports that "58% of two-year and four-year postsecondary education institutions offering distance education in the 1997-98 academic year used asynchronous Internet instruction (e.g., e-mail, listserves, and Web-based courses). Of these, 82% planned to start using or to increase their use of asynchronous Internet instruction as a primary mode of delivery in the next three years" (p. 41). The UKeU (2003) online list of UK universities offering full Web-based courses is constantly growing, too. Given this international trend, the British university offering the current MEd programme might usefully consider a similar course of action as a way of counteracting student frustration over lack of access to resource materials. In the meantime, at the very least, equipping the library at the British Council with more resource material would be a welcome stopgap.

As a number of respondents were unhappy with certain administrative aspects of the course (in terms of arrangement of local tutors, feedback on assignments, and communication between the university and the British Council), it seems that administrative procedures could be better co-ordinated to allow for quicker and more efficient communication between the students and the university, and the university and the British Council. Such a view concords with both Holmberg (1989, p. 106), who found that speeding up communication and instituting quick response and turn-around times helps to reduce the frustration felt by students, and Snowden and Daniel (1988), who state that "distance education systems, because of the inherent complexity and interdependence of their parts require 'tighter' management than conventional educational institutions" (p. 339). This belief is echoed by Rumble (1992, cited in Schlosser & Anderson, 1994), who states that the key to successful management of distance education lies in planning, organization, leadership and control (p. 31).

The issue of the UK-based tutors' individual concern for students was mentioned by a number of respondents as an area that could be improved, with one stating that the sending of "a bimonthly or quarterly email" to individual students might be a good idea -- "a personal one, with reference to your own time plan, modules, progress." Another respondent stated, "we seem to have been left on our own a bit, whereas [the university] might have thought to enquire about how things were/are going for us, as, I think, most of us are new to this level of study." This relates to Rogers' (1989) claim that isolation, anxiety, and failure to control the pace of work are particular problems with learners "who have not undertaken a substantial piece of learning for some time" (p. 148). The respondents' comments are, therefore, important considerations, and more personal support and concern for individual students' welfare would help offset the sense of isolation that distance learners often feel (Holmberg, 1989, p. 95) and contribute to learners' motivation, interest, and satisfaction (Willen, 1981, p. 113).

Although there is a school of thought in distance education that holds to treating the students as "potentially independent people to whom it is left not only to decide, but expressly to state, if and to what extent they want support or advice" (Holmberg, 1986, p. 70), it would seem that the views of those students who were investigated on the current programme take the opposite view, which posits interference on the part of the institution to prevent failure and promote success as a social responsibility of the institution. The communication element is rightly considered a cornerstone in distance education and, as Robinson (1995) concludes in her survey of learner support research, "learner-institution contact, such as regular contact with support staff, appears to have a positive effect on learner performance and persistence rates" (p. 222).

Limitations of the Study

There are a number of limitations to the study. Firstly, the sample consisted of a fairly small group (which in turn had a fairly low response rate of 41%, although possible reasons for this are given in the response rate section of the paper). Secondly, the students in the cohort were all at different stages of their studies, with some at the beginning and others nearing the end. The varying levels of experience with the course may, therefore, influence both the needs and levels of satisfaction of individual students. Finally, given the nature of the questionnaire -- an attempt to gauge the level of satisfaction of distance learners -- it should be noted that "satisfaction" is a rather elusive concept because it is a state of mind, and one, therefore, for which no relative measures between individuals exist. Furthermore, since a person's needs will also vary from individual to individual, it is hard to objectively quantify and qualify whether all peoples' needs are being met. In terms of the level of support as it pertains to meeting learners' needs, for example, a highly motivated and self-confident learner who is comfortable working on their own could quite feasibly require less support than one who is less motivated and self-confident and not particularly comfortable working by himself. For the purposes of this study, a useful definition of satisfaction was that given by Lawler (1973, cited in Poppleton, 1988), who states that satisfaction "is determined by the difference between all those things that a person feels he [sic] *should* receive and all the things that he [sic] actually *does* receive" (p. 8).

CONCLUSION

It is clearly extremely challenging for any process of education, let alone one carried out at a distance, to meet the needs of all learners. In her review of the literature in distance learning, Speth (1991) states that there is no typical distance learning student -- a view echoed by Charp (1997) -- but rather that tremendous variability and individual differences exist in the consumer population. In general terms, then, such variability and individuality will make meeting all learners' needs an extraordinarily difficult task.

It seems fair to say that anyone embarking on a course of distant-learning study at the "career education" level would have some awareness of the demands that such study would place upon them in terms of motivation, self-discipline, and time management. In choosing a distance learning course, potential students would analyse their needs and relate them to the types of courses available. It is only when immersed in the actual course of study, however, that certain problems might become apparent. How far responsibility for these problems lies with the student or with the distance learning institution will vary from individual to individual and from institution to institution, and, as such, it is hard to identify in general terms whether the fault is the result of any fundamental flaws in the notion of distance education, or whether it lies with the student or with the organising institution. Accordingly, the complicated interplay of a multitude of factors makes the successful provision of distance education a very formidable one.

The results of the survey highlighted a number of areas in which students felt let down by the course, especially in terms of learning support, and access to and provision of resource materials. The study highlighted the need for competent student support services, access to reference materials, and efficient

administrative procedures in order to better fulfil learners' needs. While in no way intended to be conclusive, it is hoped that the results of the survey have indicated some areas in which further research would be useful, and pinpointed areas which the university might like to evaluate in the light of the findings.

As the research literature appears to support the view that there is no significant difference between face-to-face and non-contiguous instruction, successful distance learning comes from factors related to learners, support, course design, motivation, and need. Distance education, as it is provided by the British university, is meeting the needs of some learners, but this is clearly not the case for all students. In light of this, the student support services and problem-solving capabilities of the organising institution are seen to be crucial to satisfying the needs of multilingual, multinational distance learners.

APPENDIX

Distance Learning Questionnaire Learners' experiences on the MEd Distance Learning Programme

1. How satisfied are you with the course materials provided on the programme?
Very satisfied [] Satisfied [] Dissatisfied [] Very dissatisfied []
2. How satisfied are you with the choice of modules available on the programme?
Very satisfied [] Satisfied [] Dissatisfied [] Very dissatisfied []
3. How satisfied are you with the feedback you have received for your assignments?
Very satisfied [] Satisfied [] Dissatisfied [] Very dissatisfied []
4. How satisfied are you with the length of time you are given to complete your assignments?
Very satisfied [] Satisfied [] Dissatisfied [] Very dissatisfied []
5. How satisfied are you with the range of support provided on the programme (ie in terms of local tutors, ISS's and the British Council)?
Very satisfied [] Satisfied [] Dissatisfied [] Very dissatisfied []
6. How satisfied are you with the level of support provided on the programme (ie is it enough)?
Very satisfied [] Satisfied [] Dissatisfied [] Very dissatisfied []
7. What aspects of the support provided on the programme do you like or dislike?
8. What areas (if any) of the programme could be improved?

Very many thanks for your participation.

All responses and personal information will be kept strictly confidential.

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